

The Center Chapel at Fort Bliss is a handsome Spanish stucco that occupies a choice location smack in the middle of the U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery School. Headquarters is just down the street, and the flag is raised each morning at reveille and lowered each evening at retreat at Memorial Circle in an adjacent field. The scene of countless military weddings, the Center Chapel is widely regarded as a spiritual center for Air Defense Artillery.

For some, however, the true spiritual center of Air Defense Artillery will always be a chapel that was built out of scraps and spare parts at a long abandoned site named Red Canyon Range Camp by air defense artillerymen toiling

# Red Canyon Chapel

by Jim Eckles

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beneath the desert sun. The chapel was a tribute not only to their faith but to the esprit de corps an ADA commander was able to instill in soldiers stationed at an isolated post. It was so distinctly Air Defense Artillery that the bells that chimed in its steeple were made of discarded Nike Ajax missile boosters.

Red Canyon Range Camp, in the northeast corner of White Sands Missile Range, N.M., was once a booming center for air defense artillery training. Today, what's left are concrete slabs, deteriorating roads and a couple of crumbling fire control bunkers. Graffiti marks the remaining foundations where deer and antelope are the most frequent visitors.

However, from 1953 through 1959, more than 10,000 visitors from 45 countries and 40 states passed through the camp to see some of the 3,000 Nike Ajax missiles that were fired by air defenders. About 300 troops from Fort Bliss, Texas, were assigned to the camp. On some days, the mess hall served as many as 1,500 meals.

During the 1950s, Fort Bliss, which lacked adequate range facilities, needed a place to conduct Nike Ajax training and annual service firings. White Sands allowed the use of the northeast corner of the range as a temporary facility. Red Canyon Range Camp opened in October 1953, just as the nation, caught up in the Cold War, was about to embark on its decade-long bomb shelter building craze. Ajax batteries received most of their basic training at Fort Bliss, and then moved to Red Canyon Range for further training which was climaxed by the firing of live missiles. Once this was completed, the units were considered ready for around-the-clock operations at a tactical Nike site. Eventually, Fort Bliss established McGregor Range closer to the fort and moved its air defense firings there in August 1959. Red Canyon Range Camp became the military equivalent of a ghost town.

To get there, you follow U.S. Highway 380 west out of Carrizozo, N.M., for 16 miles. The Red Canyon Range Camp turnoff is marked by a gate made of red rock which still stands at what was once the camp's outer entrance. At one time, both sides of the gate were topped with Nike missiles,

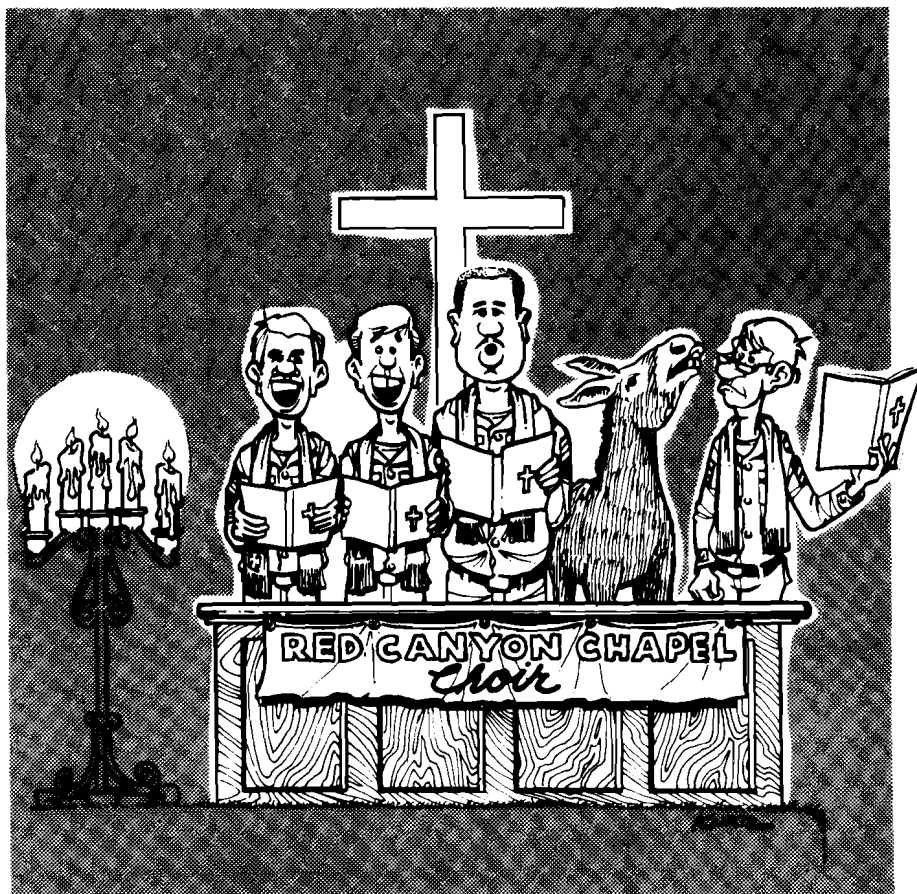
but the missiles are gone. What's left of the camp is four miles south of the highway, about 165 miles from Fort Bliss headquarters in El Paso.

Red Canyon Range Camp was built from scratch in the eastern foothills of the Oscura Mountains. Dozens of Quonset huts and other temporary buildings were erected on a flat below Chupadera Mesa. Besides the usual barracks, mess hall and motor pool, there were a small post exchange, dispensary, fire department and a recreation and service school. The soldiers also had softball diamonds and volleyball and basketball courts.

Several miles southeast of camp a missile assembly area was built on a low ridge. Nike

Ajax missiles were repaired, assembled and fueled at the site and then moved to the launch area further to the southwest. The missiles were fired at drones as visitors watched from the ridges to the east. An area west of the launch points is still littered with Nike boosters stuck in the ground like arrows that fell after being shot straight up in the air.

The men who manned Red Canyon (no women were stationed there) seemed to like the duty. Their tour was supposed to last only five months because of the isolation of the camp, but most stayed on for several tours. The last camp commander, Lt. Col. John McCarthy, liked it enough to stay four and a half years.



McCarthy was the spirit and guiding hand behind Red Canyon for most of its existence. He launched dozens of projects to improve the camp and make it more fit for the soldiers who toiled there. He soon decided that the one thing that Red Canyon Range Camp needed was a decent chapel.

For several years the camp had held church services in the small camp theater. McCarthy wanted something better but could get no funding for a chapel. So he and MSgt. William Sidell, the camp's senior NCO, drew up plans for a building and turned the project over to the troops. More than 100 men volunteered to work on the building. Construction started in December 1957.

The men spent their spare time, weekends and holidays scrounging materials for the chapel. They salvaged steel rails from Southern Pacific for the frame. Bracing was cut from the steel doors of the old Lincoln County jail. The interior walls and roof came from the tops and sides of Nike booster crates. They quarried red rock from a nearby canyon for the walls and used plastered telephone poles as the pillars on the front entry. Using cellophane and shellac, they simulated stained glass windows. For bells they hung three Nike boosters in the steeple. The boosters had been fired and the heat gave them a pleasant resonance.

McCarthy was proud of the chapel and of his men who worked on it. Maj. Gen. Patrick Ryan, then Army chief of chaplains, was so impressed that he made a special trip in 1958 to dedicate the chapel. He told the

*“This has the heart and soul of you men in it.”*

men, “A building such as this means a great deal more than a large and more expensive chapel built by Congressional appropriation. This has the heart and soul of you men in it.”

The chapel was a cross-shaped building, 87 feet long and 36 feet wide in the main section. Officially, the only cash spent on its construction was \$200 the men contributed for the shingles. After he retired, McCarthy admitted to a little creative bookkeeping. He transferred the building number from an unused temporary shed to the chapel. This allowed him to draw funds to maintain it once it was complete.

McCarthy included the chapel in tours of Red Canyon Range Camp. Mayors, city councilmen and newspapermen came to Red Canyon Range Camp from cities all over the world which had Nike installations or were potential sites for Nike installations. As the groups went through the chapel, McCarthy always had someone there softly playing hymns on the organ. A delegation from Los Angeles, where a proposed Nike site had drawn protest demonstrations, returned home and quelled the opposition. On one visit, the Norwegian minister of war broke away from the tour group

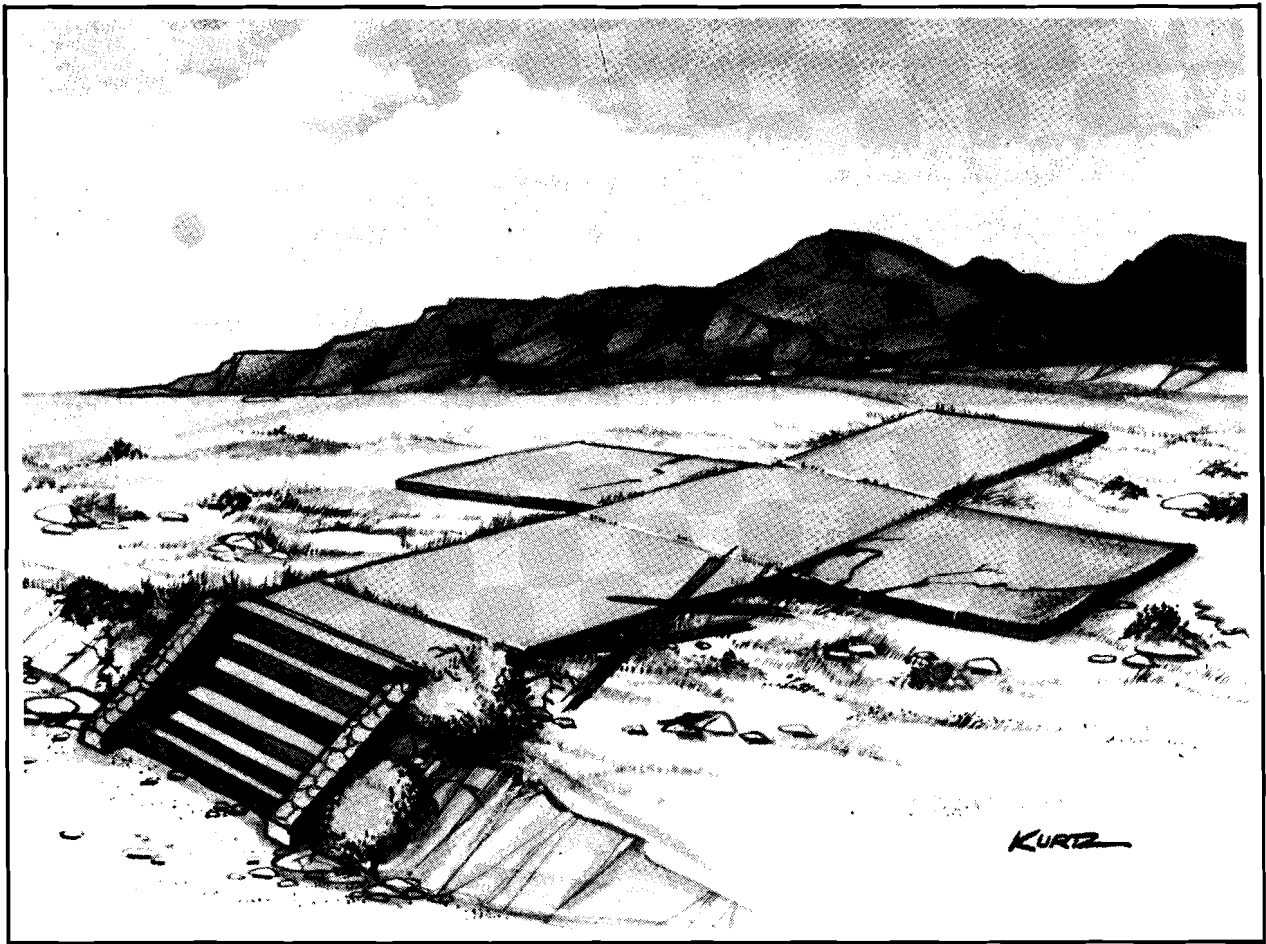
and asked the organist to play a particular hymn. He sang along as the group listened. Eyewitnesses said he had a beautiful voice.

The camp mascot, a burro named Nike whom the men caught and raised, also liked to sing in the chapel. Nike liked to attend the Catholic masses on Sunday. He had, however, an ecumenical spirit. During a Protestant service, Nike managed to get into the chapel through the side door. As the congregation struck up a hymn, Nike stuck his head into the chapel and began braying along with the choir. The service concluded right then and there, but the protestant chaplain later claimed to have made a convert of Nike.

When Air Defense Artillery left Red Canyon Range for McGregor Range, they tore the temporary buildings down. The chapel was left standing since it wasn't an official building. Then in 1961, it was discovered that the chapel had vanished. Only its concrete foundation and the stairs remain.

What happened to the chapel remains something of a mystery. Fort Bliss Real Estate Office records show the building was sold for salvage for \$219. Some people didn't believe this, and during the 1960s there were hints that something else had happened to it. What, is unclear. In the June 1972 issue of *Soldiers* magazine there was a one-page story on its disappearance and an appeal for information. Nothing much came of it. The best guess is that the chapel was bulldozed and sold for scrap.

The Nike Ajax, which was



the reason for the camp's existence, is no longer in the service. It was the world's first operational supersonic missile. Originally it was simply called "Nike" but the "Ajax" was added when the follow-on generation Nike, the Nike Hercules, was developed. It was conceived in 1945 with most of the subsequent development testing done at White Sands. Early tests included static firings of motors, live firings of boosters and sustainer motors and tests of the guidance system and warhead.

In October 1951, for the first time, all Nike components were brought together in one missile and fired. A month later, a Nike successfully intercepted a B-17 bomber drone and sent it crashing to the desert floor.

The Nike was almost 20 feet long, 12 inches in diameter and burned nitric acid and aniline. It was equipped with a solid propellant booster which is still used to boost sounding rockets at White Sands. Nike was designed to get close to its target; then a radio signal from the ground would detonate the warhead.

The first Nike unit became operational at Fort Meade, Md., on May 30, 1954. During the mid-1950s, Nike systems were installed along the Eastern seaboard. Later, the system was deployed to allied nations as air defense for industrial and metropolitan areas.

In November 1964, after a decade of service, the last Nike Ajax was withdrawn from active duty. The system was re-

placed by the Nike Hercules and Hawk.

McCarthy liked to talk about the high morale of the men he assembled at Red Canyon Range and how hard they worked. He said they were dedicated and enjoyed being at Red Canyon. It would be hard to argue with him. Not long ago, I received a call from Ernest Littlejohn, a Red Canyon private first class and missile mechanic who had settled in Michigan. He had helped to build the chapel and wanted to show it to his children. I could sense his disappointment when I told him the chapel was gone and there was no reason to go to Red Canyon Range Camp any more. □

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